

# HUDSON BAY TRAPPERS IN CHAMBERLAIN BASIN



HUDSON BAY TRAPPERS' CABIN, CHAMBERLAIN BASIN

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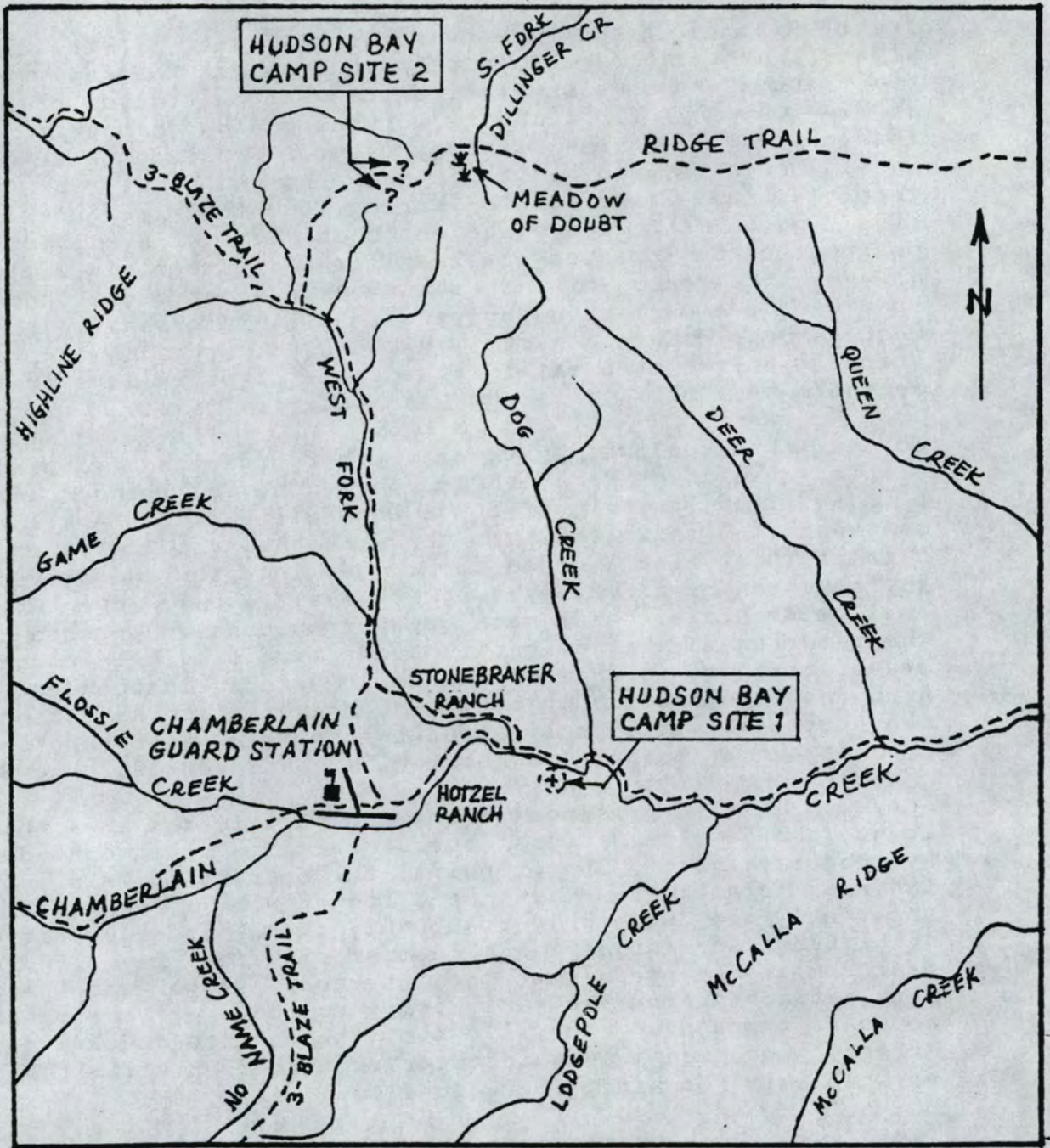
HUDSON BAY COMPANY TRAPPERS IN CHAMBERLAIN BASIN  
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In the History of the Payette National Forest, in the discussion of the first Euro-Americans in the area, Hockaday notes that "there are some unverified and sketchy records of Hudson Bay (Company) fur trappers working in the Chamberlain (Basin) country." The "sketchy records" include those of Donald McKenzie, who led a fur trapping and trading brigade into the Snake River country during 1818 to 1822. Hockaday (1968, pg 6) makes the statement that "Some of his trappers penetrated the forested areas as far as Chamberlain Basin"; however, the source of that statement has not been found and review of documentation suggests that it is probably incorrect, as the McKenzie party was known to have done their trapping in the more easily accessible river valleys in the southern area of what is now the state of Idaho.

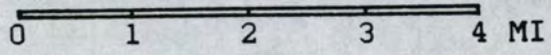
McKenzie was followed by several other organized trapping parties: Alexander Ross, 1824; John Work, 1832; and French-born American Benjamin L. E. de Bonneville, 1833. Available documentation indicates that at least the main groups of these parties also avoided the rugged interior and stayed in the southern river valleys. It is possible that adventurous small elements of these main groups could have ventured into the interior mountains, but it seems more likely that the beaver trappers in Chamberlain Basin were an independent group not recorded in history. The beaver trapping period in the Northwest lasted only about twenty years as the bottom dropped out of the fur market in 1840 (Knudson 1982, pg 80).

The very limited presence of the trappers in the area that is now the Payette National Forest seems to be accounted for by this statement: "The principal fur bearing animals in the interior forest were marten and fisher with a few beaver. Apparently they were only reasonably abundant because it did not attract any (significant) number of Hudson Bay or Northwest Company trappers into the interior. Beaver was the primary attraction for the early trappers and they were more abundant throughout the valleys of the Payette and Weiser Rivers. The mountainous interior supported only limited beaver habitat" (Hockaday 1968, pg 11).

The situation above suggests that Chamberlain Basin would not have been among the early beaver trapping areas, as access to Chamberlain Basin was formidable (and still is). The early Hudson Bay trappers were known to have worked the easier terrain of the river valleys to the south until the beaver were so few in number as to be not worth further trapping efforts. As the beaver in the easier terrain became few, it seems reasonable that the later trappers (after 1833) would have sought them in the more remote and previously untrapped areas, such as Chamberlain Basin, only to find limited numbers of beaver.



SCALE: 5/8 INCH = 1 MILE



MAP OF CHAMBERLAIN BASIN SHOWING HUDSON BAY CAMP SITES

Supporting the presence of early day beaver trappers in Chamberlain Basin is a report of former Chamberlain District Ranger Glenn A Thompson (1909-1977) in which Thompson states that Jimmy Hand showed him a Hudson Bay Company camp site in 1929, "on a sizeable flat south side of Chamberlain Creek above mouth of Lodgepole Creek" (Thompson 1968). The Thompson report implies that he was shown the site (see map, Site 1) but there was no indication of former structures. At the time that Glenn Thompson was shown the site, James M (Jimmy) Hand was 65 years old and had been prospecting in the Big Creek-Chamberlain Basin area since 1889. In 1891, Jimmy Hand, along with Andy Eason, "stopped at an old cabin in Chamberlain Basin that was supposed to have been built by Hudson's Bay trappers and at one time had been used by John Ramey" (Elsensohn 1951, pg 74). The cabin noted was undoubtedly the one that stood at the site shown to Glenn Thompson. John S Ramey was an early area prospector, having been sheriff at Washington (now Warren) in the late 1860's (Helmers 1988) and the namesake of Ramey Creek, Ramey Ridge, and Ramey Meadows on the west side of Chamberlain Basin.

During the same time period, but only discovered in 1994 in old family photos, is the cover photo on this report, made by Don Park (1905-1966) in the summer of 1928. The reverse of the photo includes the notation, in Don Park's handwriting, "Old Hidden Hudson Bay Cabin off of Ridge Trail, going to Meadow of Doubt (see map, site 2). Note: I have spent many nites here & fireplace OK." The reverse of the photo also indicates the printing date: Aug 31, 1928. Don Park began his USFS career in 1923 and, at the time of the photo, was a packer-fire guard working out of the Chamberlain Ranger Station (Park family records).

Based upon the information above, it appears probable that the Chamberlain Basin "Hudson Bay cabins" were those of an independent beaver trapping party that overwintered sometime during the 1830's. The details may never be known. Don Park's 1928 photo shows a cabin in what appears to be in a good state of preservation. Assuming this cabin was a remnant of an 1830's trapping party, it would have been almost 100 years old at the time of the photo, which is within the realm of possibility as there are records of other log structures surviving at that age (e.g., barn at Shepp Ranch; see Carrey 1968).

These fragments of history pose some questions:

1. Could the Site 2 cabin have been built later than the 1830's? Possibly, but not likely. Between the 1830's and the spotty beginnings of mineral prospecting in the 1890's,

Chamberlain Basin was essentially void of Euro-American activity, except for the U.S. Army expedition during the Sheep-eater War during the summer of 1879. If the Site 2 cabin had resulted from 1890's prospecting, it would have been about thirty years old when photographed and would likely have been identified as such by Jimmy Hand or other area old timers. Conclusion: it is highly probable that the Site 2 cabin was that of an 1830's trapping party.

2. Why did the Site 2 cabin not appear in Glenn Thompson's 1968 report? Not known; perhaps forgotten in the passage of time. Don Park would have made his discovery known if, in fact, he was the discoverer.

3. Why did Site 1 (by implication) not show evidence of a structure? The Site 1 structure was possibly of less substantial construction and had returned to Nature or, more likely, the log building was dismantled and moved to the Stonebraker Ranch or the Hotzel Ranch on Chamberlain Meadows, a little more than a mile to the west of Site 1.

Although the evidence is not conclusive, it does indicate that both sites were occupied by a beaver trapping party, during an overwinter period in the 1830's. Available information suggests that this trapping party was independent of the Hudson Bay Company trappers. Perhaps in the near term the sites can be relocated and archaeologically explored for additional information.

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